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FM AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9355
INFO RUCNCAN/ALL CANADIAN POSTS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS PRIORITY 0738
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1082
RUEHFR/USMISSION UNESCO PARIS PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 OTTAWA 000311

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/22/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CA](#)
SUBJECT: TOUJOURS EN PLACE: THE BLOC QUEBECOIS

REF: A. 08 OTTAWA 1300
[1](#)B. OTTAWA 231

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Bloc Quebecois, a federal political party exclusively devoted to promoting Quebec's interests in Parliament, emphasizes that Quebec's values -- including the primacy of French, the "crucial" role of culture, and Quebec's immigration policy -- differ from the rest of Canada. With 49 seats in the House of Commons, the Bloc remains well entrenched, regularly winning a majority of Quebec's 75 parliamentary seats. Although the Bloc's founders intended it to dissolve following a referendum on sovereignty, Quebec voters have continued to support it and will likely continue to do so as long as the Quebecois see they are getting some federal benefits from its Parliamentary role. Although there is no clear successor to party leader Gilles Duceppe, House Leader MP Pierre Paquette and Environment Critic MP Bernard Bigras appear the most likely candidates. End summary.

PROMOTING QUEBEC'S INTERESTS

[1](#)2. (C) The Bloc Quebecois ("Bloc") is a political party exclusively devoted to defending Quebec's interests in federal politics. According to the Bloc's founders and Statement of Principles, the party will have fulfilled its purpose once Quebec achieves sovereignty through a popular vote called for by the Quebec National Assembly; Quebec would then negotiate a partnership agreement with Canada. Despite the defeat of the 1995 sovereignty referendum, the Quebecois have continued to vote for the Bloc, making clear that they want a Bloc presence to promote their interests in Parliament. According to Bloc MP and Francophonie Critic Monique Guay (Riviere-du-Nord), who has served in Parliament since 1993 and easily won re-election in October 2008 by over 20,000 votes, the Bloc will continue to operate as long as it enjoys popular support in Quebec. While other federal parties seek power by appealing to a national electorate, the Bloc only fights for the issues that matter most to Quebecois, including respect for the French language, protection of cultural diversity, support for Quebec-based industries, and provincial budget autonomy, according to Bloc MP and Citizenship and Immigration Critic Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le-Ber). The Bloc is unique in Canadian federal politics by only organizing and campaigning in one province.

[1](#)3. (C) Polling suggests that the Bloc's current strength is concentrated in rural and heavily francophone areas outside the West Island of Montreal and the Quebec City region. While some Bloc MPs have noted that most of their supporters are sovereignists, pollsters also have noted that the party draws support from federalists eager to advance Quebec's interests in Ottawa. One Quebec business leader told

EconMinCouns that, although sovereignty would be disastrous for Quebec economically, he votes Bloc because the party stands up for Quebec's rights and budgetary allocations. Whether a Quebecois is federalist or sovereignist, the Bloc's platform states that he or she should always put the province's considerations first. Liberal Party MP and Francophonie Critic Raymonde Folco (Laval-Les Iles) commented privately that much of the Bloc's support is more a vote against other federal parties, rather than an endorsement of the Bloc.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

14. (SBU) A group of Progressive Conservative and Liberal MPs Q4. (SBU) A group of Progressive Conservative and Liberal MPs led by then-Prime Minister Mulroney's Environment Minister Lucien Bouchard formed the Bloc Quebecois in 1991, following the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord. In the 1993 federal election, the Bloc won 54 of Quebec's 75 seats (or 49.3 percent of the province's popular vote), becoming the Official Opposition in the House of Commons. Many analysts expected the Bloc to fade following the 1995 referendum defeat (when 50.58 pct voted against sovereignty) and Lucien Bouchard quit the Bloc to become the leader of the provincial Parti Quebecois (PQ) and Premier of Quebec. However, in the 1997 federal election, the Bloc won 44 seats (or 37.9 pct of the provincial popular vote), and in 2000 won 38 seats (39.9 pct of the popular vote). In 2004, the Bloc equaled its 2003 record by winning 54 seats (48.9 pct of the popular vote), in large part due to the federal sponsorship scandal, which devastated the Liberal Party in Quebec. In 2006, the Bloc won 51 seats (42.1 pct of the popular vote), and in October

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2008 won 49 seats (38.1 pct of the popular vote), one more than it held at the dissolution of Parliament in September. Prime Minister Office (PMO) Senior Quebec Advisor Dimitri Soudas commented that the Bloc's share of the vote has declined since 1993, but election data shows that the Bloc's share of the popular vote has ebbed and flowed and has only been in marginal decline since 2004, with almost no impact on its number of seats.

GILLES DUCEPPE AND BLOC POPULARITY

15. (C) Gilles Duceppe is currently the longest serving federal political party leader in Canada. He was the first Bloc member elected to Parliament, as an independent under a sovereignist banner in 1990. Bloc leaders have included Lucien Bouchard (1990-1996), Duceppe (as interim leader January-February 1996), Michel Gauthier (1996-1997), and again Duceppe (since March 1997). In May 2007, Duceppe briefly entered the PQ leadership race to replace Andre Boisclair, but withdrew after only one day of campaigning. Many commentators had expected that the October 2008 election would be Duceppe's last campaign, but he has shown no signs of stepping down yet. He is a highly experienced campaigner, and his next federal election campaign will be his sixth. The PMO's Soudas predicted privately that Bloc House Leader MP Pierre Paquette (Joliette) and Environment Critic MP Bernard Bigras (Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie) are Duceppe's most likely successors, with Paquette the more frequently cited by analysts.

16. (SBU) According to a recent Canadian Press Harris-Decima poll, Duceppe retains a 50 pct favorable rating in Quebec, with 28 pct viewing him unfavorably. Independent analyst Bruce Campbell has noted that these "strong numbers for the Bloc likely make it almost impossible" for either the Conservatives or Liberals to capture a majority government at present. Bloc MP and Francophonie Critic Guay noted that the Bloc has continued to poll at around 40-43 pct support in the province since the October 2008 election.

¶17. (SBU) The Bloc explicitly admits that only the Quebec National Assembly and the Quebecois have the legitimacy to determine Quebec's political future. The Bloc enjoys close relations with the PQ, the sovereignist party founded in 1968 that led the campaign for sovereignty in the failed 1980 and 1995 referenda, the latter with Bloc support. The parties share the stated goal of an independent Quebec, and their candidates often attend each other's events. Many Bloc and PQ members even hold membership in both parties. According to Bloc MP Carole Lavallee (Saint Bruno-Saint Hubert), the Bloc and PQ share many of the same campaign worker volunteers. They are, however, separate parties with distinct organizational structures.

¶18. (SBU) In January, Duceppe and PQ leader Pauline Marois held a joint Bloc-PQ caucus meeting, claiming that the sovereignty movement remained in strong shape and that Quebec would be much better off facing the recession alone than as part of Canada. According to MP Guay, joint Bloc-PQ working groups meet monthly to discuss a range of issues, including culture, francophonie, and international affairs. Noting that the PQ is the Official Opposition in the Quebec National Assembly, the Bloc's 2009 Action Plan stated that the Bloc-PQ QAssembly, the Bloc's 2009 Action Plan stated that the Bloc-PQ "sovereignist coalition" should mobilize "to make Quebec into a country."

¶19. (C) Privy Council Office (PCO) Quebec Policy Advisor Eric Ferguson noted to poloff that PQ leader Marois was well positioned to win the next provincial election, as Liberal Premier Jean Charest has held power since 2003 -- a long period by Quebec standards -- so voters may want a change next time. Ferguson added that Marois could interpret a victory as a mandate to pursue sovereignty, but cautioned that no more than about 30 pct of Quebecois support outright independence. Ferguson added that a referendum remained unlikely in the medium term, unless the federal government pushed a strong anti-Quebec agenda, which was unlikely. Behind the scenes, Bloc MPs admit that they are more interested in greater autonomy and rights than in breaking up Canada, at least for now. MP Guay commented that the PQ was founded only 41 years ago and the Bloc just 18 years ago, while other countries have taken several hundred years to gain independence. Conservative MP Steven Blaney (Levis-Bellechasse, a Quebec City district) insisted to

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poloff that the Bloc was no longer a sovereignist party.

DON'T COUNT ON FRANCE

¶10. (U) According to some commentators, French President Sarkozy's comments to the Quebec National Assembly in October 2008 praising Canadian unity and rejecting division -- and again in February at a ceremony honoring Quebec Premier Jean Charest with the Legion of Honor medal in Paris -- appeared to bury France's long-standing policy of non-interference and non-indifference to the issue Quebec sovereignty. Many analysts noted that President Charles de Gaulle's July 1967 "Vive le Quebec libre" speech in Montreal, which electrified the sovereignty movement, was only a distant memory. In a joint letter, Duceppe and Marois publicly responded by criticizing Sarkozy's "disrespect" for the sovereignist cause.

QUEBEC VALUES AND WEDGE ISSUES

¶11. (SBU) According to Liberal MP and Francophonie Critic Raymonde Folco (Laval-Les Iles), the Bloc had developed a pattern of expertly seizing on timely or wedge issues to boost its popularity during elections. During the October 2008 federal election, Duceppe turned juvenile justice

proposals and cuts to culture funding into attacks on the ruling Conservative Party (ref a), and took credit for preventing Prime Minister Harper from winning a national majority. The Bloc argued that strengthening the Young Offenders Act would result in children being imprisoned alongside hardened criminals. Commenting on Quebec values, one Bloc MP opined that to "spend a week in Quebec and a week in Edmonton, and you'll see it's two completely different places." The Bloc's 2008 electoral platform criticized the Conservative Party's "laissez-faire economic policy, repressive justice policy and foreign policy built on use of force" as being "diametrically opposed" to Quebec's values. The platform also alleged that the Liberals and New Democratic Party (NDP) would concentrate greater social, economic, and cultural power in Ottawa at Quebec's expense. According to Bloc MPs, Prime Minister Harper's "demonization" of "separatists" during the short-lived Bloc-backed Liberal-New Democratic Party coalition in December (ref b) showed a "lack of respect" to the Quebecois.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND IMMIGRATION

¶12. (U) Noting that the Quebecois are a "francophone island" representing only two percent of North America's population, the Bloc still seeks ever greater recognition of Quebec's distinct nationhood. The Bloc has proposed a bill extending the Charter of the French Language (also known as Quebec provincial law 101, defining French as Quebec's official language) to companies working under federal jurisdiction in Quebec. The Bloc has also proposed that Quebec province -- rather than the federal government -- regulate telecommunications and radio in the province, and called for greater use of French also within the Canadian Forces. The Bloc has sought an amendment allowing Quebec to opt out of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act to preserve Quebec's integration model -- requiring learning French -- in contrast to Canadian multiculturalism, which is a "mosaic" approach rather than a "melting pot."

BUDGET AUTONOMY

¶13. (SBU) The Bloc often complains that federal government budgets are unfair to Quebec, and has accused both the Conservatives and the Liberals of abandoning Quebec's QConservatives and the Liberals of abandoning Quebec's forestry and manufacturing sectors, and instead giving preferential treatment to Ontario and the West. According to Bloc MPs, Quebec sends its tax revenues to Ottawa "without receiving much back," although most commentators disagree with this assessment. The Bloc has criticized the government's decision to slow the growth in equalization payments to Quebec, but the PCO's Ferguson said that Quebec remains the largest equalization recipient (ref b). Various Quebec governments and the Bloc have consistently criticized federal spending in areas that fall under Quebec's jurisdiction. More generally, the Bloc calls for an end to the federal government's power to spend and run fiscal deficits.

BUILDING INTERNATIONAL EXPERTISE

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¶14. (U) Bloc MPs define Quebec's values also in terms of foreign policy, demanding enforcement of the Kyoto Protocol and the return of Guantanamo detainee Omar Khadr. The Bloc vigorously opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Bloc views its parliamentarians as Quebec's spokespeople, and believes that they play an important role in defending Quebec's interests both in Ottawa and abroad. The Bloc has stressed that its parliamentary work on foreign policy, monetary policy, defense, international trade, and industrial policy helped to develop Quebec's skills and competencies for

sovereignty. Bloc MPs regularly travel abroad on parliamentary business, such as in mid-March, when a delegation visited Congress to explain the Bloc's sovereignist agenda and to discuss free trade and the border.

The Bloc portrays itself as playing a constructive role in Ottawa. It has alleged that the federal government only began to take action to prevent an EU ban on the seal hunt after the Bloc raised the issue in Parliament.

YOUTH OUTREACH

¶15. (C) Bloc MP Thierry St. Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber), an engineer who was first elected to Parliament in 2006 as a 28 year-old, explained that the Bloc was using "new media" technologies such as the Internet and social networking sites to reach out to youth. The Bloc's 2009 Youth Forum Action Plan noted the importance of academic institution student councils for recruiting new activists. In addition to focusing on such areas as sovereignty, the environment, culture, and employment, the Bloc Youth Forum platform called for Quebec to seek International Ice Hockey Federation recognition for a Quebec national team using as precedents the gold-winning Quebec under-17 team in the 2006 World Ice Hockey Challenge, and the Scotland/Wales/England soccer teams. Bloc MP Guay, however, commented that it would be easier to energize youth during a referendum.

COMMENT -- HERE TO STAY

¶16. (C) The Bloc remains well entrenched and likely to continue to play an active, if highly Quebec-specific, role in federal politics, while also maintaining a spoiler role against future Liberal or Conservative majority governments. There does not appear to be any prospect of the party breaking up or giving up. The Quebecois retain a reputation as highly strategic voters, electing a federalist provincial government under Premier Charest and a largely sovereignist slate of MPs to Ottawa. Bloc MPs also appear to enjoy their parliamentary perks and privileges, and are keen to serve long enough to claim federal pensions and benefits. While Quebec separation does not appear on the cards anytime soon, Quebec nationalism may make some progress among immigrant communities from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, whose children -- as a result of "Bill 101" -- have grown up in Quebec's French-speaking school system. Several current Bloc MPs are visible minorities, which would have been hard to envisage eighteen years ago. The Bloc will face some renewed challenges to its future representation in Parliament as the Liberal Party continues intensive outreach under new and charismatic -- as well as bilingual -- leader Michael Ignatieff, but these will not be particularly more serious than earlier challenges to its political presence in federal politics.

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